

Music for String Quartet

By students of the Faculty of Music

University of Toronto

John Sawyer, Erika Bennedik, violins

Susan Holbrooke, viola, Ingrid Seidel, cello

FRIDAY, MAY 15th, 1964 at 8:15 P.M.

Concert Hall, Edward Johnson Building

Allegro moderato

Adagio

Menuetto: Presto

Finale: Presto

Haydn began and ended his career as a composer of quartets: in the line stretching from his Opus 1 (c. 1755) to the incomplete Opus 103 (1803) one can trace virtually the whole evolution of the classical quartet. Much of that evolution was Haydn's single-handed achievement. From the modest beginning — in an idiom not far removed from the open-air style of the Viennese 'quadro' or divertimento, as Alfred Einstein notes — we see a gradual gain in confidence and in the definition of texture. The later works help us observe the remarkable interchange of influence between Haydn and Mozart. Finally, the master's last complete works in this form — of which this is one — date from 1797 and 1798, when the young Beethoven was already at work on his Opus 18 quartets.

The present piece is one of two quartets published in 1799 with a dedication to Prince Lobkowitz (later Beethoven's most famous patron). Evidently there was to have been a complete set of six quartets for Lobkowitz, but the aging Haydn managed only these two. And in fact this one in G was not a new composition at all, but rather an arrangement — a marvellously suitable one, though — of a previous work. It had appeared some five years before as the seventh of Haydn's eight sonatas for piano and violin.

The first movement is rich in themes; but, as so often with Haydn, these seem to bear a curious family resemblance. The prominent dotted-note motive of the opening, and several variously-arranged successions of fast triplet eighth-notes, recur very freely throughout; and the result is a unified over-all impression of a rather civilized march.

The Adagio opens with a short phrase which is surely one of Haydn's most inspired gestures and develops into one of his greatest instrumental slow movements. The phrase, presented in octaves to heighten the effect of its sober contours, is later harmonized, used in overlapping voices, with telling alterations of the intervals, and so on, to dominate the movement. In the expansion and working-out, much of the decoration is Italian in derivation: the first-violin roulades may suggest Bellini or even Chopin. But there is in the expression of this piece a very special Haydnish quality of amplitude and human warmth. The quality is familiar from many other fine works of his, though seldom represented in such purely golden musical terms as here.

There follows further delight, in one of the grandest of Haydn's minuets. The marking, Presto, is evidently authentic, and the spirit seems akin to that of a fast whirling waltz rather than a courtly minuet. The continuity of phrases in this music is unusually broad and free. A surprising key-contrast ushers in the Trio, whose series of pedal-points in the bass may have been suggested by the similar movement in Mozart's E-flat Quartet (K.428).

The finale is a scurrying rondo of folkish cast, freely contrapuntal in its manner of development, and extremely high-spirited in mood — a type of movement which is peculiarly Haydn's. Of special interest here is the use, in the main theme, of a major scale with raised fourth: a scale well-known in some Central-European folk musics, as we learn from Bartok.—J.B.

Allegro

Andante - Allegro giocoso

Kodály published two string quartets. The first was written between 1908 and 1910; the second in 1918, and published in 1921, along with several other of his works, by Universal Editions.

This second quartet is a solemn piece of music. Even the folk melodies Kodály quotes in the last movement seem, in their context, shadowy and restrained. One of them, a friendly little dance tune built around a major triad, is introduced first, like a call from the far distance, in the middle of the slow movement. Another, more obviously a "typical" Hungarian folk song, is in the plagal minor mode (as the sixth note of the scale is missing, it is impossible to tell whether it is Dorian or Aeolian), and is accompanied by sustained fourths and fifths on the 2nd violin and cello, representing, perhaps, the drones of a hurdy-gurdy. The irregular metric pattern — the first line has four bars; the other three, three bars each — is often to be found in the Hungarian folk literature.

The second and third movements are played without pause.

— INTERMISSION —

BRAHMS: STRING QUARTET IN C MINOR, OP. 51, No. 1

Allegro

Romanze: Poco adagio

Allegretto molto moderato e comodo

Allegro

The two quartets of Opus 51 are assigned dates that cover over two decades. Brahms is said to have begun composing string quartets as early as 1853, twenty years before these two were finally surrendered to the publisher. How many nearly-perfect quartet works were thrown towards the trash heap by this super-critically young genius nobody can know. Most historians estimate the number at about twenty.

The largeness of Brahms' ideas, and often the almost symphonic character of their treatment, becomes apparent at once in this C minor work. The first movement is an Allegro in 3/2. The training of the twenty-odd abandoned works certainly makes itself felt here. Nothing could be more mature and assured than the opening page of this quartet. In eight bars we have the major subject stated, the galloping and dramatic idea which gives the movement its energy. The secondary, more temperate and descending idea is alluded to and the chase begins. Later we hear the cello in an altered version of the descending second subject, a wonderfully expressive kind of instrumental moan. We continue on, and the first violin is given soloistic treatment. The final section is an even more intense rushing toward the final relaxation.

The second movement, a Romanze, is a curious, nobody-but-Brahms piece, a cross between a song without words and a lament, the sad child's song he often sings but woven so beautifully it is at moments breathtaking. As so often, it is rhythmically that he is poetically inspired here. Beginning in a more or less straight forward 3/4, he mixes dotted and undotted rhythms, with the inner voices carrying much of the melodic train. Then begins a section in triplets, close to the ultimate in tender feeling. He begins to mix his material and at one point we hear the second subject of the first movement recalled in a descending viola line.

The third movement is an Allegretto molto. Some of the dramatic color of the first movement shows up again. We hear two ideas and right away, in the harmonic parts of the second theme, we get the falling chromatic line again. After the repeat, we get an extension of these ideas into a lilting, utterly charming dance-like passage that modulates about and delivers us back to the main material. The trio section is in F, suddenly a carefree note showing through.

The Allegro finale is a concerted scramble towards the final climax. This is certainly the sternest of the four movements, almost athletic in its impatience with the few *espressivo* bars. The pace gets madder and madder till the double bar.

From the Columbia Masterworks
record-jacket notes by Charles Burr